

# Food sovereignty

September 2012



## Contents

Section	Page
i Defining food sovereignty	1
ii Why do we need to change the food system?	3
iii What changes are needed to achieve food sovereignty?	5
iv How are people and countries working towards food sovereignty?	6
v Can food sovereignty feed the world and tackle poverty?	8
vi What would food sovereignty mean for international trade?	10

## Defining food sovereignty

### 1. What is food sovereignty?

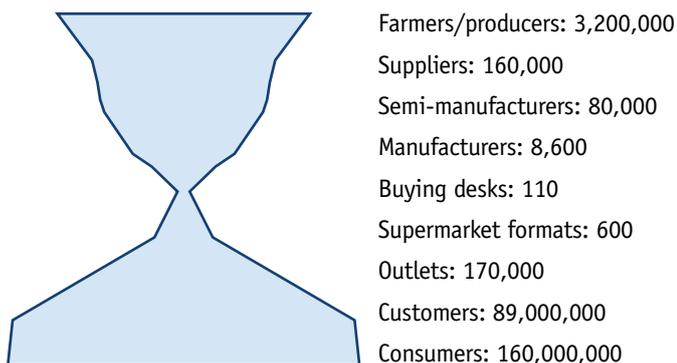
In essence, food sovereignty is about the right of peoples to define their own food systems. Food sovereignty puts the people who produce, distribute and consume food at the centre of decisions on food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations that have come to dominate the global food system.

The UN has estimated that there is enough food being produced worldwide to feed 12 billion people.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is badly distributed, much of it is unhealthy, and the way it is produced is bad for the welfare of food producers, workers and the planet. Consequently, the current food system sees one billion people left hungry, a further billion malnourished, and 1.3 billion overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup>

Behind all these problems is a huge imbalance of power and wealth. To a large extent, global markets dominated by a small number of large corporations determine

#### Diagram showing the concentration of power in our food system

##### Netherlands, Germany, France, UK, Austria and Belgium



Source: Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved*



La Via Campesina, Renee Leahy, IPS

La Via Campesina's 'Global Day of Action for Climate Justice'

what sort of food is produced, how, and the ways it is distributed. This sees food distributed on the basis of ability to pay, not need, and more profitable processed food promoted over fresh food.

It is clear that we will only achieve a just and sustainable food system if we tackle these power relationships, taking power from the global food giants and handing it back to smaller-scale food producers and consumers.

A vision for such a system was developed in the 1990s by La Via Campesina, the international movement which brings together more than 200 million small and medium-scale farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous peoples, migrants and agricultural workers from 70 countries. In 1996 they coined the phrase 'food sovereignty' to describe this just, democratic and sustainable food system.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the concept has been further developed with the collaboration of a wider range of small-scale food providers. Given that they provide half the world's food,

this means that the food sovereignty framework has evolved through the experience and analysis of the people who produce most of the world's food.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, more than 500 representatives of organisations of small-scale food producers, workers, indigenous peoples and social movements from over 80 countries gathered together in the village of Sélingué, Mali to strengthen the global movement for food sovereignty. That gathering, named after a legendary Malian peasant woman who farmed and fed her people well, resulted in the Nyéléni declaration and action plan,<sup>5</sup> which outlined the agreed principles of food sovereignty and a set of collective actions.

The principles in the Nyéléni documents outline what food sovereignty is FOR and what it is AGAINST. It can be summarised as:<sup>6</sup>

- Food as a right, not a commodity. Food sovereignty upholds the right of individuals and communities to define their own food and agriculture systems in order to provide sufficient healthy and culturally appropriate food.
- Valuing food providers. Many farmers and food workers suffer exploitation or even violence at the hands of corporate landowners and powerful buyers. Small farms are being lost at an alarming rate. In Europe, for example, it has been estimated that three family farms disappear every minute.<sup>7</sup> Globally, land grabs are also estimated to have affected up to 227 million hectares, an area the size of Western Europe, in the ten years from 2001.<sup>8</sup> Food sovereignty asserts food providers' rights to live and work in dignity, and protects the rights of women, indigenous peoples and other under-represented groups.
- Prioritising local and regional provision over distant markets. The food price crises of recent years, which have hit populations in net food importing countries particularly severely, have shown the dangers of countries' reliance on volatile international markets for basic food stuffs. Food sovereignty means that production for local and regional consumption takes precedence over supplying distant markets, and the 'dumping' of subsidised produce at prices below its costs of production is rejected. Under food sovereignty, countries have the right to protect their food and agricultural sectors rather than having to liberalise them.
- Control of natural resources such as land and water being in the hands of food producers rather than privatised by corporations. This means, for example, that farmers can save seeds, rather than having to purchase them from multinational seed companies each year. It requires that conflicts over the use of such resources between local users are resolved peacefully, and can help to ensure that these resources are used in more socially and environmentally sustainable ways.
- Building knowledge and skills. Local expertise can often be undermined by technologies such as genetic modification or the introduction of plant or animal

varieties that are not suited to the local environment. Food sovereignty calls for valuing producers' knowledge and skills, and for research and support to be provided.

- Protecting natural resources. Food sovereignty means working with nature using ecological methods, avoiding damaging industrial methods that rely on non-renewable resources, cause local health problems and pollution, and contribute to climate change.

## **2. What is the difference between food sovereignty and food security?**

Food security is simply about satisfying the need for all people to have access to healthy and nutritious food. The World Health Organisation defines food security as existing 'when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life'.<sup>9</sup>

Food sovereignty is a critical alternative to food security that asserts that not all ways of realising food security are equal. People's right to choose what they eat, how it will be produced and what relationships this entails is critical. Food sovereignty looks at the political and economic power imbalances inherent in the global food system and challenges who controls how food is produced and distributed. Food sovereignty seeks to tackle some of the root causes which lead to hunger and poverty in a holistic way that avoids creating further problems.

## **3. What is agroecological production and how does it relate to food sovereignty?**

Agroecological production relies largely on renewable resources available on the farm, such as natural predators for pest control, rather than external inputs like chemical fertilisers. It involves conserving resources and biodiversity by working with local ecosystems and so is dependent on the specialist local knowledge of small-scale producers.<sup>10</sup> Agroecology not only benefits the environment and makes farming more resilient, but can also increase productivity, particularly for small-scale farmers.<sup>11</sup>

The effectiveness of agroecological methods was confirmed by the first International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD). This UN- and World Bank-sponsored report is based on the findings of 400 experts from across the globe who considered the state of global agriculture today and identified key challenges and options for the future of farming. It was approved by 58 governments in 2008.<sup>12</sup> The report argues for a fundamental change in the way agriculture is practised in order to eliminate hunger and make food production sustainable. It advocates agroecological approaches rather than reliance on agrochemicals and GM technologies.<sup>13</sup>

Agroecology is actively promoted by global peasant movement La Via Campesina and experts such as Professor Olivier De Schutter, the UN special rapporteur on the right to food.<sup>14</sup> It is a key aspect of food sovereignty.

## Why do we need to change the food system?

### 4. What are the problems of the current food system?

Our global food system is characterised by striking inequalities.<sup>15</sup> In the UK we throw away 7.2 million tonnes of food and drink from our homes every year<sup>16</sup> while globally a billion go hungry. Jean Ziegler, former UN special rapporteur on the right to food, has pointed out that there is now enough food produced to feed 12 billion people<sup>17</sup> so it is the current food distribution system that must be changed if we are to prevent worldwide hunger from increasing.

#### Problems in the UK

Superficially, the food system seems to be working well in the UK. Supermarkets appear to offer convenience, choice and efficiency, with people having to spend much less of their income on food today than they did just a few decades ago.

However, this food system imposes many hidden costs on the public. These include tax credits to top up food workers' low wages (a recent survey found 86 per cent of supermarket workers received less than the UK living wage),<sup>18</sup> the burden on the NHS from diet-related diseases and increasing obesity, and massive clean up costs for pollution from industrial agricultural systems.

A handful of large corporations increasingly dominate the production, processing, distribution, marketing and retailing of food. This concentration of power enables

them to wipe out competition or dictate tough terms to their suppliers. Sixty years ago, European and US farmers received 45-60 per cent of the money that consumers spent on food. By 2002, that had dropped to 7 per cent in the UK.<sup>19</sup> New farmers struggle to buy land due to high prices and concentrated ownership and at least one dairy farm closes down every day.<sup>20</sup> The UK's food system also relies extensively on cheap imports.

#### Problems in the global south

Over recent decades, neoliberal policies implemented under structural adjustment programmes overseen by the World Bank and IMF have involved many governments in the global south cutting back support for farmers (such as research and extension services) and dismantling mechanisms designed to help stabilise food prices, such as grain reserves. This has resulted in greater poverty and hunger.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, international trade agreements have required developing countries to open their agricultural markets to international imports, including those dumped on them by EU and US companies at less than the cost of production. Unable to compete with the low prices, millions of farmers have seen their livelihoods destroyed and then faced poverty as landless rural workers or urban slum dwellers. Reliance on imports also leaves poor consumers, who spend most of their income on food, vulnerable to price changes in volatile international markets. The food crisis of 2007-2008 pushed 115 million people into hunger worldwide.<sup>22</sup>

For example, in Sri Lanka 90 per cent of the poor are small-scale farmers and landless workers, most of whom try to

#### Women smallholders can benefit greatly from food sovereignty



Geetha Chamberlain

make a living from food production for domestic markets. However, the Sri Lankan government has encouraged an export-led agricultural economy, based on plantations growing cash-crops for export and increasing food imports. Cheap imports have resulted in the collapse in price of some domestically produced crops, such as rice, leading to increased malnutrition among the rural poor, increased social disparity, political unrest and farmer suicides.<sup>23</sup>

Many trade agreements also allow direct foreign investment provisions in agricultural production and even farmland. These changes have tended to favour large scale producers and global agribusinesses at the expense of local producers who grow food for local markets, compounding problems of inequitable land ownership.

Women produce between 60 and 80 per cent of food in developing countries, much of it on small-scale operations. However, within agriculture women have been systematically marginalised, ignored in government policy and frequently prevented from controlling or owning the land they work. Fewer than 10 per cent of women farmers in India, Nepal and Thailand own land.<sup>24</sup> In much of the global south, women farmers also have worse access to credit than men.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, women are disproportionately affected by land and water grabs, fuelled by rising food, fuel and land prices. For example, due to the gendered divisions of labour, women tend to bear more of the social costs of displacement as they are forced onto more marginal lands in search of food and water for their families. Where land grabs result in small holdings being replaced by plantations, women who are offered jobs tend to be paid less and denied labour rights.

### **Environmental problems**

The system of food production based on intensive, industrial scale agriculture and fisheries is also environmentally unsustainable, undermining producers' livelihoods and future food production. Polluting inputs, long-distance transport, over-packaging and waste have led to:

- loss of soil fertility
- soil erosion
- depletion of freshwater
- reliance on fossil fuels for nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides
- the contamination of land and water as pollutants accumulate
- biodiversity loss
- increased greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to climate change

Agrochemicals also have serious implications for human health. The World Health Organisation estimates that pesticides kill 355,000 people every year – most of these deaths are in the global south. Long-term exposure to

pesticides can cause infertility, immune-system disorders and cancer.<sup>26</sup>

Our current corporate-dominated global food system fails to properly value food and food producers. Industrialised countries' emphasis on competing in international markets is blind to human and environmental costs and the undemocratic concentration of power.

### **5. Can't we just have another green revolution to improve food production?**

The 'green revolution' refers to developments in plant breeding between the 1960s and 1980s that improved yields from major cereal crops, particularly wheat and rice, and other staple crops. The main focus was on the research, development and transfer of agricultural technology, such as hybrid seeds and fertilisers, through massive private and public investment that went into transforming agriculture in a number of countries, starting in Mexico and India.

Current efforts to launch a second green revolution fail to address two key problems with the first one.<sup>27</sup>

Firstly, while the green revolution may have produced more food, it did not manage to reduce hunger because it did not address the problems of access.<sup>28</sup> The green revolution failed to alter the highly concentrated distribution of economic power, and if anything, exacerbated it – particularly access to land and purchasing power.

Secondly, the switch to industrial farming methods was accompanied by social and environmental problems. Land, resources, power and money were concentrated in the hands of corporations and large farms as smaller farmers became reliant on expensive products. La Via Campesina is clear that "the costs of production under the conventional 'Green Revolution' model are more expensive and out of the reach of smallholder farmers".<sup>29</sup> This view is supported by the World Bank- and UN-sponsored IAASTD report (see question 3). The focus on technology paid no regard to who controlled that technology and ignored the knowledge of the people who were expected to adopt it. Results included significant biodiversity loss due to the mass adoption of hybrid seeds and soil erosion.

### **6. Is there any place for genetic modification (GM) technology in food sovereignty?**

The short answer is no. GM technologies increase corporate control of the food system and use of industrial inputs and reduce biodiversity. Whereas the benefits of GM are largely unproven and the risks unknown, non-GM agroecological methods have been shown to be productive and sustainable.

Being able to save and use seeds from one year to the next is very important for small-scale farmers. However once a seed has been genetically modified the company that produced it can patent it and place conditions on its use. Monsanto, for example, forces growers to sign a

'technology use agreement' when growing its patented GM crops. The agreement stipulates that the farmer cannot save the seeds.<sup>30</sup> For small farmers, in particular, switching to GM seeds can be costly and a great risk. While they may be offered incentives to start using GM seeds, later costs can be high as they must purchase new seed each year, as well as fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides. And if seeds do not perform as expected this can leave small farmers financially exposed. There have even been cases of GM companies taking farmers to court for being in possession of seed that they had not paid for, after their non-GM crops were contaminated by GM seed from neighbouring farms.<sup>31</sup>

One of the selling points of some GM crops is that they require less use of pesticides. However, in practice the opposite is often the case. Research has shown that weeds are now developing resistance to the GM companies' herbicides that are designed to be used with their crops, and that this has led to increasing infestations of 'super-weeds',<sup>32</sup> so-called because of their resistance to conventional herbicides.

GM technologies are also more likely to increase problems related to climate change as they ultimately lead to greater reliance on a small number of crop varieties. As weather patterns fluctuate and become more extreme, greater diversity, not less, is the key to increased resilience. Hellen Yego, a Kenyan smallholder farmer and activist, argues that while indigenous seeds germinate at different times making them unsuitable for mechanical harvesting, they have the crucial advantage of resilience, as extreme weather is less likely to destroy an entire crop.<sup>33</sup>

## What changes are needed to achieve food sovereignty?

### **7. What changes do you want to see?**

WDM supports the actions called for in the declarations from the Nyéléni forums.<sup>34</sup> As well as developing the principles of food sovereignty (see question 1), representatives at the 2007 forum committed to building it in practice through steps such as strengthening local markets, using international legal instruments and fighting for land reform. They also agreed to resist barriers to food sovereignty, including unfair trade and climate injustice, and to mobilise a wider movement.

The Nyéléni Europe forum was a gathering of around 400 food producers and activists in Austria in 2011, following on from the 2007 Nyéléni forum, to catalyse a food sovereignty movement in Europe. The declaration calls for a decentralised food system based on co-operation and democracy rather than profits.

This requires a radically reformed Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to support small-scale sustainable farming rather than seeking to undercut producers worldwide;<sup>35</sup> removal of the EU Biofuels Directive, which diverts food to meet the fuel demands of multinational companies



**The local food festival organised in Krems, Austria as part of the Nyeleni Europe forum in 2011**

and consumers at the expense of people in the global south being able to afford to eat; and regulation to curb financial speculation on food prices.

To achieve food sovereignty in Europe, proposals include developing local infrastructure, using public procurement (for schools, hospitals, prisons, etc) to support local and sustainable agriculture, and land reform that protects small-scale producers and the interests of farmers. In addition, global governance of trade must be reformed.

### **8. How have WDM's campaigns contributed to the struggle for food sovereignty so far?**

Global food sovereignty will require changes at international, national and local level, and many of WDM's campaigns have addressed some of the barriers to food sovereignty.

Recently, WDM has been campaigning to prevent speculation by investment banks and other financial institutions which contributes to food price spikes. Deregulation has given speculators unprecedented access to markets in contracts based on food prices, which were originally intended to help farmers deal with uncertain income from growing crops. Now bankers and hedge funds play a much larger role than the physical food traders in many futures markets and can overwhelm them. European and US regulation is needed to prevent this.

WDM has for many years been part of the movement for trade justice, calling for the reform of international trade rules to prevent cheap, often subsidised produce from the global north destroying local markets in the global south and give countries the policy space to implement trade systems which are most appropriate for them. These trade rules have led to many poor countries' agricultural sectors being destroyed and consequently they have become reliant on volatile international markets to feed their populations. WDM's campaigning has helped to reduce the demands made of developing countries in trade deals.

WDM also campaigned against the structural adjustment policies forced on developing countries by the World Bank

and International Monetary Fund. These programmes required countries to produce cash crops for export at the expense of growing food for local markets and consumption.

In 2000, WDM was part of an EU-wide campaign against the development of genetic modification, working with groups in the global south to highlight the negative impacts of the technology on producers.

## How are people and countries working towards food sovereignty?

### **9. Where are people working to put food sovereignty into practice?**

Poor food producers, labourers and landless peasants across the global south have formed movements as a means to gain land and oppose the globalisation of industrial agriculture. These movements have then gone on to develop the principles of food sovereignty, and start to put them into practice. Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) organises landless people to occupy parts of large landholdings owned by rich landowners that are lying unused. They then pressure the government to use existing land reform laws to transfer the land to them. Since 1984, 370,000 families have gained access to agricultural land through MST organising, allowing them to feed themselves and make a livelihood.<sup>36</sup> The movement now runs a national agroecology school and many local producer co-operatives.

In Kerala, India, a state-run project called Kudumbashree has enabled poor women farmers to become self-sufficient in food.<sup>37</sup> A quarter of a million women in Kudumbashree have formed farming collectives, cultivating diverse crops organically to meet their consumption needs and selling any surplus in the local markets. This has had great environmental benefits. In the town of Perambra, for example, a large area of unused land has been transformed into an area of lush vegetation. It has benefited the poor farmers most, many of whom had previously been labourers, but now find they are earning more and have greater control of their time, resources and labour.

There are many more examples of food sovereignty principles being adopted around the world, from the government-supported, Afro-Venezuelan cacao farmers and artisanal fishermen of the coastal community of Chuao, Venezuela, to urban farmers involved in sharing knowledge through the New York Farm School.

However, full food sovereignty will require substantial, systemic changes at the national and international level, for example the reform of international trade rules, in order to be achieved.

### **10. Have any countries made significant moves towards food sovereignty at the national level?**

Venezuela and Cuba are among the countries at present that are pursuing food sovereignty most actively.

Cuba is the first country that has attempted to implement food sovereignty at a national scale.<sup>38</sup> The collapse of the USSR, on which Cuba was heavily reliant for exporting and importing goods, combined with a tightening of the US energy embargo during the 1990s, precipitated a food and energy crisis. Out of necessity, the country began to revolutionise its farming techniques, which until then had been heavily reliant upon fossil fuels through the use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides and farm machinery. Moving away from reliance upon large scale, industrial farming has meant the country has embraced many of the principles of food sovereignty, with positive results.

In 15 years or so, the country moved to 80 per cent organic agriculture, and from a majority of large state-owned farms to a majority of small co-operatives and privately owned farms. With 80 per cent of Cubans living in cities, providing enough food to feed an urban population when fuel scarcity made transportation of food difficult was a challenge. City-dwelling Cubans made use of small vacant lots, raised beds and their own yards and patios to grow their own food wherever space was available using organic permaculture methods.<sup>39</sup> Now urban gardens provide 50 per cent of the vegetables needed by the 2.2 million residents of Havana.<sup>40</sup>

In 2007, Jean Ziegler, then UN special rapporteur on the right of food, visited Cuba and reported that the country had made great steps towards being able to feed itself. It also had the lowest figures for undernourishment in the developing world.<sup>41</sup> But there is still work to be done. Although it does well in terms of fruit and vegetable production, the country still relies heavily on imports of milk, meat and eggs, and has a high incidence of anaemia amongst young children and pregnant women as a consequence. However, the country has many good examples of small-scale organic farming, and farmers in Cuba are now among the highest paid workers.

In Venezuela, the human right to food and the country's ability to feed itself have been at the heart of Venezuelan government policy since 1998. For over a century, farming in Venezuela had been neglected because of a reliance on the profits from the oil industry to pay for the large-scale import of staple foods. This had led to a desertion of rural areas, with only 12 per cent of the Venezuelan population living in the countryside making it the most urbanised country in Latin America.<sup>42</sup> In 1998 however, the importance of developing local, sustainable agriculture as a means to ensuring a secure supply of food for the population became enshrined in the constitution. Since then, food sovereignty policy and practice in Venezuela have been developing rapidly. Government support for developing sustainable agriculture has included: land reform that has allowed millions of acres of land owned

by large landowners to be reclaimed for agriculture; laws requiring banks to provide credit to farmers at reasonable rates; supplying farmers with equipment such as tractors and seeds; and giving farmers access to training in organic agricultural techniques. Farmers are also able to sell their crops to a government agricultural corporation rather than relying on intermediaries, which has ensured a fairer price for their products.

Overall food production in Venezuela has increased by one quarter since 1998.<sup>43</sup> The country has become self-sufficient in its two most important grains: maize and rice.

Encouraging alternative systems of trade and food distribution in Latin American countries has led to a move away from dependence on multinational corporations for the production and distribution of food. This has allowed a food system based on the principles of food sovereignty to thrive.

### 11. What does the food sovereignty movement look like in the UK?

Across the UK, a multitude of groups are working for a more just and sustainable food system, though not all explicitly under the banner of food sovereignty.

WDM is working with others to strengthen links between groups in the UK and internationally. The table below shows a few examples of activities that demonstrate the various principles of food sovereignty (although many cut across multiple areas since food sovereignty demands a holistic approach).

### 12. How wide is the understanding of and commitment to food sovereignty in the world at the moment?

Support for food sovereignty has already spread around the world. In addition to the quarter-billion strong movement La Via Campesina (see question 1), there is a large US Food Sovereignty Alliance with over 40 member organisations, and an Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa. In Europe, 400 food producers and activists met in Austria in 2011 and produced a European version of the original declaration of Nyéléni created in Mali in 2007, which outlines a vision for food sovereignty in Europe (see question 7). There is also an Asian food sovereignty movement.<sup>44</sup>

### 13. What role are women playing in the food sovereignty movement?

Rural women are the world's main producers of staple crops in sub-Saharan Africa, where women produce up to 80 per cent of basic foodstuffs both for household consumption and for sale.<sup>45</sup>

Women have a strong history of organising collective resistance against the oppressive forces of industrialisation (see question 4) and rising food prices. For example, women take a central role in decision making and creation of vibrant local economies, such as the *Chalayplasa*, a barter-based network of local food markets in Peru.<sup>46</sup> This gives smallholder subsistence farmers direct

Principle	Transforming	Resisting
<b>Food as a right not commodity</b>	Food co-ops put control in the hands of their workers and sell food on a non-profit basis	Food poverty campaigners are challenging the marketing of junk food to children
<b>Valuing producers</b>	Farmers' markets and box schemes help reconnect producers and consumers, cutting out big retailers and ensuring producers get a better price for their products	Unions and campaign groups are opposing exploitation of food workers in the UK and abroad
<b>Localising food</b>	Urban growing can enable inner city communities to produce healthy, affordable and locally-produced food that they control	Campaigns are working to change laws and regulations that favour supermarkets and large landowners
<b>Democratic control</b>	Seed-saving and swaps help preserve diverse varieties beyond the few products sold by supermarkets and commercial seed companies	Groups are supporting communities struggling against land grabs by large corporations
<b>Building knowledge and skills</b>	Research is showing the benefits of agroecological farming, despite receiving little research funding compared to industrial methods	Activists are taking action against genetic modification to oppose its development and stop it contaminating existing crops
<b>Working with nature</b>	Organic farming, agroecology, permaculture and other ecological approaches regenerate natural resources	Campaigners are fighting the expansion of environmentally harmful, industrial, 'zero grazing' dairies

market access and the opportunity to buy locally-grown produce which they are unable to grow themselves.

Rural women have been, and continue to be, instrumental in protecting biodiversity and opposing monoculture, as in the Movement of Peasant Women in Brazil. Responsible for maintaining and developing seed varieties passed down from generation to generation, rural women can apply their knowledge of these seeds to create local food systems, resilient to the effects of climate change. Furthermore, these seeds are patent free, a common good available to all that can be saved and used year after year.

## Can food sovereignty feed the world and tackle poverty?

### **14. Do we need large-scale industrial agriculture to feed a growing and increasingly urbanised population, or could food sovereignty do this?**

Academic studies predict that ecological production, less waste and more equitable consumption could feed a global population of 9 billion in 2050.<sup>47</sup> Agroecological farming can also be highly productive. The largest ever study of agroecological farming in the global south, which surveyed 287 projects, and covered 37 million hectares in 57 countries, found that yields increased by an average of 79 per cent compared to conventional methods.<sup>48</sup> Currently, 70 per cent of people are fed without reliance on industrial food production.<sup>49</sup>

However, adequate production levels do not mean that everyone will have access to a healthy and appropriate diet in sufficient quantity. The reforms called for by the food sovereignty movement would ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth within the food chain so that food producers and workers would be better able to access the food they need and want.

Much urbanisation in the global south is due to people leaving rural areas as a result of poverty - caused by problems such as land grabbing or failure to achieve a fair price for their products. Food sovereignty seeks to support rural food producers, rather than forcing them to move to cities. Since agroecological farming is low cost and resilient, it is well suited to reducing hunger among small-scale producers, one of the worst affected groups.

Poor people living in urban areas are also a group at risk of hunger but once again it is small-scale farming methods, and food grown in the city that is the way forward as opposed to large-scale agriculture. The use of small plots of land (back gardens, unused public or private land) to grow fruit and vegetables is an effective way for poor people in urban areas to supplement their diet. From Cuba and Guatemala, to Toronto in Canada and the UK there are many examples of the growth in importance of urban agriculture.

**Fishermen in Venezuela using traditional, artisanal methods to fish, which is more sustainable. A government ban on trawler fishing three years ago has helped local fisherfolk maintain a decent livelihood as well as helping with local fish stocks**



In Havana, Cuba, urban gardens provide 50 per cent of the fruit of vegetables eaten by the people of the city. Such practices can really benefit the urban population, and the urban poor in particular. Urban households engaged in urban gardening consume a greater quantity of food, more fruit and vegetables and a more diversified diet.<sup>50</sup>

### **15. Wouldn't food sovereignty make food more expensive, putting food beyond the reach of the poor?**

The current food system does not serve people in poverty well; one in seven of the world's population goes hungry.<sup>51</sup> Reliance on international trade leaves importing countries very vulnerable to unstable markets, with food price spikes in 2010 alone pushing 44 million more people in to extreme poverty.<sup>52</sup> Small-scale producers are often very poor themselves and tend to buy more food than they produce, so do not benefit from higher prices overall. Even in rich countries, many people struggle to afford a healthy diet.

Food sovereignty builds up local and regional food systems, which reduces the number of intermediaries between producer and consumer. As a result there is less opportunity for the handful of large corporations that dominate the global food trade to extract a large share of the value (for example, grain trader Cargill made \$4 billion in profits during each of the recent food price spikes)<sup>53</sup> leaving more for the producer and helping to keep the price down for the consumer.

Food sovereignty has the potential to provide more local employment as it requires skilled labour and develops local economies, whereas industrial techniques depend more on machinery and external inputs. In the UK, the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture fell from 15 per cent in 1939 to 2 per cent by 2000.<sup>54</sup>

Small-scale farmers' and workers' poverty is often a result of decades of development policies that have marginalised them, for example through underinvestment in infrastructure and research. These conditions can be changed and research by international institutions suggests that: "growth in agriculture can make twice the impact on poverty as growth in other sectors, both through its direct impact on raising the incomes of the large numbers of the poor who live in rural areas, and through the strong links between agriculture and other parts of the economy."<sup>55</sup> Food sovereignty could also make small-scale farmers' livelihoods more stable and secure through adoption of closed-loop agroecological farming systems that reduce dependence on off-site inputs.

Achieving food sovereignty also means removing unnecessary pressures on food prices, including excessive financial speculation, the use of crops for biofuels and costly inputs like chemical fertilisers. Moreover, many of the policies needed to deliver food sovereignty, such as reforming the international trade system, would help to tackle poverty and inequality, enabling people to pay

producers decent prices for their produce.

### **16. If we achieved food sovereignty, what could we actually eat in the UK?**

Food sovereignty doesn't exclude international trade, but seeks to prioritise production for local and regional consumption. In the UK, we now import 40 per cent of our food, a sharp rise since 20 years ago when the proportion was just 30 per cent.<sup>56</sup> In the case of fruit, 90 per cent is imported and the amount of land planted with fruit and vegetables has fallen by one-fifth in the last 15 years.<sup>57</sup>

Achieving food sovereignty in the UK would mean a change towards a more healthy, local and sustainably produced diet and tackling waste. Both from a health and sustainability perspective, it would be likely to mean reduced consumption of animal products and processed foods.

A recent study in Scotland considered whether Fife could feed itself.<sup>58</sup> It found that Fife produced enough vegetables to get its 'five a day', though it would mean a more limited range of fruit. There are plenty of cereals in Fife to make porridge and bread; more beef and whisky than the people of Fife can eat and drink and plenty of hens, although trade would be required to maintain current consumption of dairy products and pork.

### **17. Wouldn't food sovereignty keep poor countries stuck in agriculture rather than encouraging diversified developed economies?**

All countries need to feed their populations, yet many countries in Africa and Asia have moved from having large agricultural surpluses fifty years ago, to becoming major importers of cereal and other staples.<sup>59</sup> Reliance on international markets makes countries vulnerable to fluctuating food prices and forced to spend valuable foreign exchange on food imports.

Food sovereignty involves countries not only producing food but also diversifying into processing and distributing it. In this way countries or communities can add value to their products or reduce their reliance on other countries or foreign companies for these services.

Evidence also shows that countries that have developed recently, like South Korea, have done so by using revenues from their agricultural sectors to develop other parts of the economy, such as manufacturing.<sup>60</sup>

## What would food sovereignty mean for international trade?

### **18. Isn't international trade beneficial for everyone and essential in countries without enough land or resources, and to compensate for poor harvests?**

Trade can bring significant benefits but only if appropriate trade policies are adopted. The food sovereignty movement argues that food should be viewed primarily as sustenance for the community, rather than as a commodity to be traded. Food producers and consumers should be at the heart of decision making about whether food should be traded internationally, and should have the right to promote and protect their food systems from imports of subsidised or unsustainably produced food.

Subsidised imports of staple foods into Africa and Latin America frequently undercut local prices, leaving only the larger and corporate farms able to compete.<sup>61</sup> These cheap food imports destroy the domestic food market and make local food producers poor. Instead, local farmers are employed to grow cash crops in order to earn money to buy imported food at their local markets. But during the 2008 food crisis, the price rises for staple foods outpaced those for cash crops, leaving farmers unable to feed themselves.<sup>62</sup> Affordable food supplies should also be supported by public policies, such as food reserves, which have often been undermined by the 'free market' policies imposed upon developing countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in order to guarantee new loans or write off bad debt.

Trade liberalisation has also forced many farmers to leave their land and migrate to the city, leading to a hungry, jobless urban population, a shortage of rural farmers and the loss of valuable traditional farming knowledge. For example, under the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexican markets were opened to subsidised US corn imports in 1994. The resulting price drop led to the loss of 2 million jobs, with savings captured largely

by the two companies that dominated sales of tortillas rather than consumers.<sup>63</sup>

While food imports may be necessary to help countries dealing with major disasters, reliance on food imports to feed a country's population makes that country vulnerable to price changes in volatile international markets. Low income countries with food deficits faced a 20 per cent leap in the cost of food imports between 2009 and 2010,<sup>64</sup> even though that year saw the third highest harvest on record.<sup>65</sup>

### **19. Is it consistent to support both Fair Trade and food sovereignty?**

Fair Trade initiatives, most visibly manifested through Fairtrade labelling, have played a role in strengthening the movement for trade justice by raising public awareness and providing fairer returns for producers in developing countries who are part of a Fair Trade system.

Fair Trade also highlights the importance of co-operative forms of organising for smallholder producers. However, while Fairtrade labelling provides a fairer return, it works within a market framework, and doesn't seek to make some of the structural and political changes that food sovereignty aims to address. In recent years, for example, Fairtrade has worked in scaling up the amount of goods sold through multinational corporations. While this does grow supply chains working in Fairtrade, it does not match up with the more radical overhaul of the food system demanded by food sovereignty.

There is a growing movement that supports both Fair Trade and food sovereignty, however. For example, the Cumbria Fairtrade network has been investigating how best to align the principles of Fairtrade and supporting developing country producers alongside strengthening local food producers and local markets.<sup>66</sup> In India, Fairtrade producers from the Chetna Organic Farming Association, have also been aiming to strengthen food sovereignty locally.<sup>67</sup>

## References

- 1 Ziegler, J. (2001) *Report by the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Mr Jean Ziegler, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/10*. UN Economic and Social Council
- 2 Patel, R. (2007) *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World's Food System*. London: Portobello Books
- 3 La Via Campesina (1996) *Food sovereignty: A future without hunger*. Rome: La Via Campesina
- 4 Altieri, M (2009) *Small farms as a planetary ecological asset: five key reasons why we should support the revitalisation of small farms in the global south*, Penang:Third World Network
- 5 Declaration of Nyeleni (2007) <http://www.nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>
- 6 World Development Movement (2011) 'Transforming our food system; the movement for food sovereignty' [http://www.wdm.org.uk/sites/default/files/Food%20sovereignty%20briefing\\_10.11.pdf](http://www.wdm.org.uk/sites/default/files/Food%20sovereignty%20briefing_10.11.pdf)
- 7 European Co-ordination of La Via Campesina (2009) 'Time to change European Agricultural Policy for the good of both the Global North and South' <http://www.eurovia.org/spip.php?article31&lang=fr>
- 8 <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=6856>
- 9 World Health Organisation. <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/> [Accessed 3 September 2012]
- 10 Transnational Institute (2012) *Agrarian Justice, Alternative Investment Model, International Investment Regime and BITs*. The Hague: Transnational Institute
- 11 Grainger-Jones, E. (2011) 'Global food crisis: Smallholder agriculture can be good for the poor and for the planet.' *Guardian Poverty Matters blog* (1 June) 2011.
- 12 Greenpeace (2008) *The World Agriculture Report 2008: Results and Recommendations*. Amsterdam: Greenpeace
- 13 Practical Action (2010) *Securing Future Food: a summary of the IAASTD findings and their implementation... or not!* Rugby: Practical Action.
- 14 Transnational Institute (2012) *Agrarian Justice, Alternative Investment Model, International Investment Regime and BITs*. The Hague: Transnational Institute
- 15 Patel, R (2007) *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World's Food System* London: Portobello Books
- 16 WRAP 'The facts about food waste' <http://england.lovefoodhatewaste.com/content/facts-about-food-waste-0> [Accessed 3 August 2012]
- 17 Ziegler, J. (2007) 'Press Conference by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food. 26 October 2007' Rome: FAO
- 18 Fair Pay Network (2012) *Face the difference: the impact of low pay in national supermarket chains*. London: Fair Pay Network
- 19 Corporate Watch (2002) *What's wrong with supermarkets?* <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/download.php?id=45>
- 20 Pimbert, M. (2012) *Towards food sovereignty: Reclaiming autonomous food systems*. London: IIED, p.12
- 21 World Development Movement (2002) *Structural damage: the causes and consequences of Malawi's food crisis*. London: WDM
- 22 World Development Movement (2012) *Questions and answers: food speculation*. London: WDM <http://www.wdm.org.uk/sites/default/files/Tricky%20questions%20food%20speculation%208.11.pdf>
- 23 War on Want. 'Small farmers in Sri Lanka' <http://www.waronwant.org/overseas-work/food-sovereignty/small-scale-farmers-in-sri-lanka> [Accessed 15 August 2012]
- 24 Agricultures Network (2009) *Theme overview: Women and food sovereignty*. Wageningen: Agricultures Network
- 25 FAO (2011) *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011. Women in Agriculture: Closing the gender gap for development*. Rome: FAO
- 26 World Health Organisation 'Toxic hazards' <http://www.who.int/heli/risks/toxics/chemicals/en/index.html> [Accessed 15 August 2012]
- 27 Community Alliance for Global Justice (2008) 'Four Categories of Problems with AGRA' <http://www.seattleglobaljustice.org/2008/06/agra-watch-blog-post/> [Accessed 10 August 2012]
- 28 Friends of the Earth International (2005) *Nature: poor people's wealth - the importance of natural resources in poverty eradication*. Amsterdam: FOEI
- 29 La Via Campesina Africa (2011) *Putting Farmers First Declaration*. <http://www.puttingfarmersfirst.ca/la-via-campesina-africa-declaration/> [Accessed 10 august 2012]
- 30 Center for Food Safety. 'Genetic engineering and patents.' <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/campaign/save-our-seeds/genetic-engineering-and-patents/> [Accessed 13 August 2012]
- 31 ETC Group (2004) 'Canadian Supreme Court Tramples Farmers' Rights -- Affirms Corporate Monopoly on Higher Life Forms' Ottawa: ETC Group
- 32 Navdanya et al (2011). *The GMO emperor has no clothes. A global citizens report on the state of GMOs – False promises, failed technologies*. New Delhi: Navdanya
- 33 Verbal information to WDM
- 34 Nyeleni European Food Sovereignty Movement (2011) *Nyeleni Declaration*. <http://www.nyelenieurope.net/en/download/category/14-english> [Accessed 10 August 2012]
- 35 European Food Declaration (2011) *Towards a healthy, sustainable, fair and mutually supportive Common Agriculture and Food policy* Vienna: Nyeleni Europe <http://nyelenieurope.net/foodsovcap/declaration>
- 36 Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Brazil's Landless Workers Movement) 'What is MST?' <http://www.mstbrazil.org/whatismst> [Accessed 13 August 2012]
- 37 One World South Asia (2010). *Food security as if women mattered (Part II): Why and how it works in Kerala*.
- 38 Community Solutions (2012) *The Power of Community: how Cuba survived peak oil*
- 39 Koont, S (2004) 'Food security in Cuba.' New York: Monthly Review
- 40 Community Solutions (2012) *The Power of Community: how Cuba survived peak oil*

- 41 UN Human Rights Council (2008) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler: addendum : mission to Cuba*, Geneva: UNHCR p.8-9
- 42 Monthly Review (2009) 'The Venezuelan Effort to Build a New Food and Agriculture System.' New York: Monthly Review
- 43 Monthly Review (2009) 'The Venezuelan Effort to Build a New Food and Agriculture System.' New York: Monthly Review
- 44 Asia Pacific Network on Food Sovereignty <http://www.apnfs.net> [Accessed 15 August 2012]
- 45 Agricultures Network (2009) *Theme overview: Women and food sovereignty*. Wageningen: Agricultures Network
- 46 Agricultures Network (2009) *Theme overview: Women and food sovereignty*. Wageningen: Agricultures Network
- 47 Soil Association (2012) *Feeding the future: how organic farming can help feed the world* Bristol: Soil Association
- 48 Soil Association (2012) *Feeding the future: how organic farming can help feed the world* Bristol: Soil Association, p. 6
- 49 ETC Group (2009) *Who will feed us? Questions for the food and climate crises*. Ottawa: ETC Group
- 50 FAO (2010) *Fighting poverty and hunger: what role for urban agriculture* Rome: FAO
- 51 FAO (2010) '925 million in chronic hunger worldwide.' Rome: FAO
- 52 World Bank (2011) *Food price watch: February 2011*. Washington: World Bank
- 53 Blas, J. (2011) 'Record earnings from Cargill on back of crop disruptions.' *Financial Times* (9 August)
- 54 Corporate Watch 'The UK farming crisis: which crisis do you mean?' <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=2629> [Accessed 30 August 2012]
- 55 ActionAid (2010) *Fertile Ground*. London: ActionAid
- 56 Global Food Security. 'UK threat.' <http://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/issue/uk.html> [Accessed 10 August 2012]; WWF (2008). *Environmental impacts of the UK food economy with particular reference to WWF Priority Places and the North-east Atlantic*. Godalming: WWF
- 57 National Consumers Council (2009) *Seasons' promise: an enjoyable way to tackle climate change*. London: NCC
- 58 One Planet Food (2010) *Our Mutual Food*. Fife: One Planet Food
- 59 Holt-Gimenez, E. and Patel, R. (2009). *Food Rebellions; crisis and the hunger for justice*. Oxford: Fahamu Books, p. 21
- 60 Ha-Joon Chang (2007). *Bad Samaritans: Rich Nations, Poor Policies and the Threat to the Developing World*. London: Random House
- 61 UK Food Group (2011) *Securing future food: towards ecological food provision*. London: UK Food Group, p. 10)
- 62 WDM (2010) *WDM food speculation campaign: Questions and answers*. <http://www.wdm.org.uk/briefing/wdm-food-speculation-campaign-questions-and-answers>
- 63 WDM (2008) *Raw deal: The EU's unfair trade agreements with Mexico and South Africa*. London: WDM
- 64 FAO (2010) 'FAO Food Price Index climbs five percent in August.' Rome: FAO
- 65 FAO (2010) 'One trillion food import bill as prices rise.' Rome: FAO
- 66 Cumbria FairTrade Network (2011) 'Cumbria Local and Fair: Fair dealing for a sustainable future: the case for Fairtrade and local. A Day Conference.' Cumbria: Cumbria FairTrade Network.
- 67 Chetna Organic. 'Seed sovereignty.' <http://www.chetnaorganic.org.in/thrust-areas/seed-soverignty> [Accessed 20 August 2012]

---

For further information, contact: [wdm@wdm.org.uk](mailto:wdm@wdm.org.uk) | +44 (0)20 7820 4900  
 More detailed information and reports are available at [www.wdm.org.uk/food](http://www.wdm.org.uk/food)

---



The World Development Movement campaigns against the root causes of poverty. Working in solidarity with activists around the world, we oppose injustice and challenge the policies and institutions which keep people poor.  
 World Development Movement, 66 Offley Road, London SW9 0LS  
 t: 020 7820 4900 e: [wdm@wdm.org.uk](mailto:wdm@wdm.org.uk) w: [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk)